BUREAUCRACY AND THE URBAN POOR

Occasional Paper No. 5

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AUGUST, 1969

The research for this paper was supported in part by National Aeronautics and Space Administration Grant NGL 33-022-090 to Syracuse University.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between widespread personal poverty and bureaucratic public administration in urban America. The urban poor are characterized by a distinct set of socio-emotional traits and constitute a peculiar and special kind of clientele for the organizations with which they interact. Bureaucracies are specialized, hierarchical, impersonal and slow. But the poor have immediate needs, and these needs are interrelated, not specialized. The paper examines alternatives to bureaucratic organizations which might prove more effective in meeting the needs of the urban poor. The first is a religiously based service or welfare organization which considers the client's needs as a whole. This approach is limited by its religious base and small size. The second alternative is the proposed application of project management at the community, or client level. This approach seems to open the possibility of coordinated, systematic service to solve the problems of urban poverty on a personal level.

BUREAUCRACY AND THE URBAN POOR

There are two fundamental problems in urban America. The first is widespread personal poverty. The second is bureaucratic public organization. There are other urban problems to be sure--high rates of crime, population density, unemployment, malnutrition, substandard housing, and racial concentration, coupled with low levels of education, motivation, income, and a lack of political and administrative responsiveness. But each of these problems is a function of the two basic urban ills, poverty and bureaucratic organization. This is an essay about how these two problems interrelate and what must be done to begin to solve them.

The Poor as Clients

The causes of widespread urban personal poverty are well known. What is not understood is the manner in which these causes, working together, result in rather predictable behavioral characteristics in the affected population. Years of economic struggle, low levels of education, broken homes, and the transition from rural to urban life have produced an interesting set of socio-emotional traits. Although the following are gross generalizations, these are some of the most common traits exhibited by the urban poor. They are

generally unable to develop role empathy and demonstrate a distinct inability to understand the reasons others behave as they do. Closely tied to an inability to understand another's role is the tendency of the poor to personalize relationships, particularly relationships with officials. The poor also show a marked inability to cope with the complexity of new and different situations. In addition, there is an immediacy to the needs and demands of the urban poor. Psychologically they appear unable either to see potential long-range consequences of their acts, or to wait for possible long-range results. Perhaps more important, the poor seek immediate gratification of their needs and are easily frustrated when these needs are not met.

The economically deprived live in a world dominated by a contradictory combination of false hope, frustration and despair. The poor hope that their needs will be met without their having to bear the costs, for they see no way they could. As a result of a long series of high hopes and unmet needs, there develops a widespread feeling of helplessness and powerlessness, especially with respect to the formally organized institutions of the society. This results in a retreat into a certain kind of apathy toward their circumstances which only complicates and worsens the initial condition. They can be lifted from this apathy only by grand

promises, greater than the last that were broken. The urban poor, then consititute a peculiar and special kind of clientele for the organizations with which they interact.

The Bureaucratic Syndrome

What, then are the characteristics of the organizations that deal with the poor? In a word, they are bureaucratic. This means, of course, that they are hierarchical and that the behavior of the man at the "line"--the school teacher, the social worker, the policeman--is in large part dictated by his hierarchical superiors. Bureaucratic organizations are highly specialized and professionalized. The school teacher, must deal with his client's education, the social worker with his client's welfare, the housing official with his client's housing, the employment official with his client's job, the policeman with his client's behavior, and the courts with their client's right to justice. Each specialization has its own highly formalized education through which the professional develops a common set of beliefs and points of view. The specialized and professionalized organization is in its own sphere highly powerful; in many cases they are essentially self-policing fiefdoms. The forces of expertise, hierarchical autonomy, and political access converge to make each of these bureaucracies very potent.

The bureaucratic organization is at once highly impersonal yet seemingly preoccupied with details about the individual's personal background. The official may be cool and not especially sympathetic with any problem but the particular one in which he is interested; he may, therefore, seem impersonal to his client. Yet this official is likely to ask personal questions about the client's life. He is at once impersonal and prying.

And finally, the bureaucratic organization is slow. It must keep records, it must follow rules and regulations, and each of its activities with a particular client must be properly justified, recorded, and stored. The time lag between requests for action and a decision to act is often a matter of weeks rather than days, or hours.

Contemporary analysts attribute other fundamental characteristics to publicly administered organizations. Mature organizations tend to elevate survival to their first objective. If the needs of welfare clients coincide with the survival needs of a social work organization there is no problem. If, however, the needs of welfare recipients in some way threaten the welfare bureaucracy it is patently clear that the agency, rather than the client, will be the victor. In their search for survival, agencies will professionalize to the point of building values, will utilize

statistics to enhance their strength, and will make the appearance of change while not actually changing. Publicly administered bureaucracy, because of its high specialization and professionalization, is more responsive politically to those who are in support of their survival needs and less responsive to those who seek change.

The Problem Nexus

A fundamental problem, then, is the remarkable difference between the behavioral characteristics of the poor and the characteristics of the organizations that have been developed to deal with poverty. The urban poor seek relatively immediate and short range gratification of a host of needs and see these needs as a ghestalt. Employment, to the poor, is intimately connected with housing, which is associated with welfare and transportation. All these are connected with education. The organizations erected to accomodate these needs are so fragmented and so specialized that the poor man must go to one for his welfare, another for his housing, a third for his education, and so on. Each is highly bureaucratized and at least as sensitive to its own survival as it is to the poor man's needs. If these organizations are coordinated at all, it is at the top, at the city, county, state or national level. They are not coordinated at the level of the individual client, with the possible

exception of some welfare agencies. It is no wonder, then, that clients develop a feeling of helplessness or powerlessness when their needs are not met in either a holistic or a short term way. As a consequence they begin to think in terms of finding alternative ways of meeting their needs.

The close interrelationship between widespread urban poverty and bureaucratic public organization is apparent. If it is assumed that the behavioral characteristics of the poor cannot be rapidly changed, then it is bureaucratic organization which must be changed. This change must occur if there is to be a more effective response to the needs of the urban poor.

Alternatives to Bureaucratic Organization

There are some possible alternatives to bureaucratic organization which might prove more effective in meeting the needs of the urban poor. The first is described by Orion F. White, Jr., in his study of the Wesley Agency in San Antonio, Texas. There he found a small group of agency officials, 32 in number, maintaining three neighborhood centers. Wesley officials, he found, related to their clients, not as subordinates, but as peers. The poor client is viewed in Wesley as a ghestalt and there is an attempt to find a solution to all of the symptoms making up the poverty syndrome. The Wesley organiztion appears not to be interested in main-

taining the status quo of the client in order to keep itself in business. There is a conscious attempt to provide service at the personal level and an attitude that the official never gives up on his client. Wesley consciously tries to enable the client to present himself as a peer in the organization so that he can learn how to relate more effectively to other institutions in his community. The goal, then, is to avoid subordinating the client in the way that bureaucracies commonly do.

White describes the problem faced by the Wesley organization in orienting new officials. The professionaly trained social worker has a tendency to utilize his social position and education in such a way as to hold the client in an inferior position. The official can judge the client, the client cannot judge the official. Wesley attempts to alter the views of new social workers so that they regard their clients as peers and are prepared to associate with them knowing that a worker's abilities and effort in behalf of the client are to be judged not only by superiors in Wesley, but by the client.

Several factors make the Wesley approach non-bureaucratic. First, there is only the most loosely arranged hierarchy. Officials are officials and status differentiation is very modest. In addition, officials and clients have meshed their

status relationships in order to lessen the characteristics of hierarchy. The organization is small enough to resist specialization, therefore each official recognizes that he must look after all needs of his client. And, the emphasis is on a rapid response to the needs rather than on questions of eligibility, review and record keeping.

Wesley's success is no doubt partially a function of its religious base. The level of staff committment to the needs of the poor and their virtual unanimity on the importance of meeting these needs in the Wesley way is substantial. The fact that it is small enables the agency to resist natural tendencies to bureaucratization. At the same tiem, its smallness sharply reduces the number of clients it can effectively handle. As a consequence, there is always a shortage of money, a shortage of workers, and a shortage of other resources, but there is no shortage of clients. Although the Wesley approach has demonstrated remarkable success in dealing with the urban poor, much of this success is based upon two factors, the non-bureaucratic advantages of small size, and the religious character of the organization. Because these two factors are not likely to be found in large scale public organization, the applicability of the Wesley approach to large scale urban problems is rather limited.

Another alternative to bureaucratic public organization which also overcomes some of the weaknesses in the Wesley approach is called matrix management. The authors have researched matrix management in the Apollo Program of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. The approach utilized by NASA is a relatively unique one, in many respects counter to classic bureaucratic forms.

Rather than attempting to do everything 'in-house' many of the pieces of hardware and indeed many other services are obtained from private industry by contract. This enables NASA to accomplish its mission without building a huge bureaucracy. Contracts terminate, bureaucracies do not. If the Nixon administration is moving increasingly in the direction of attempting to deal with urban problems through industry, both black and white owned and operated, then the NASA experience is directly relevant.

Matrix management is carried out in the Apollo Program by "project managers." The project manager is distinct from the established parts of the organizational hierarchy. For instance, at the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama, there are the permanent parts of that facility; such as research and development laboratories, budgeting offices, personnel offices, purchasing and contract offices, auditing offices, and so forth. The project manager is assigned a

particular responsibility, for example, the design, fabrication, and testing of a rocket engine. This responsibility is terminal. He must monitor contracts with industry and must cut horizontally across the regularly established hierarchies of the NASA Center at Huntsville. In short, he must bring together or coordinate all the parts of industry and of his organization that bear on the success of building that particular engine. And, of course, his work on the engine is coordinated with the work of those who are dealing with the other stages of the rocket, the guidance systems, the spacecraft,etc. He must then view his work as an integral part of an entire effort, an effort which will not succeed unless his work is properly done. But, to accomplish his work he cannot build his own hierarchies. He must, by compromise, by cajoling, by favors, and by the use of other stratagems, cause the regularly established parts of the organization to integrate their efforts so as to contribute to the accomplishment of the over-all goal.

As in the case of the Wesley organization, there are two principal reasons why the matrix management approach in the Apollo Program seems to work. There is a very high level of committment. Those who work in the laboratories in the bureaucratically constituted parts of the organization are committed to the success of the Apollo Program and are

prepared therefore to assist in meeting the needs of the project manager even though the project manager is not his boss. The headquarters of the organization has consistently supported the needs of the project manager, particularly if these needs appear to be threatened by bureaucratic tendencies in the established parts of the organization. There is also a committment to providing the resources necessary to meet the deadlines set in the Apollo Program. It is not the special and particular needs of the regularly established bureaucracies that rule, it is the schedule that is sacred. The project manager, then, must do all in his power to cause the contractors in industry, the personnel, budgeting, and housekeeping bureaucracies and all others to work in a way which supports his ability to meet his schedule.

The success of the space effort is not simply a function of management. Continued high levels of funding plus a strong national committment to a relatively non-controversial objective are probably more fundamental to the success of the space program than is its administration. As the nation moves toward a committment to a viable solution to the poverty problem, and prepares to finance that solution, the administrative experiences of the heavily funded technological programs could be vital. The alternative to traditional bureaucracy--the project manager--used in the Apollo Program seems directly applicable to this effort.

Matrix Management of Urban Poverty

If it were possible to develop at the community level the equivalent of the project manager, empowered with resources and support from the city, state and national tovernments, he might serve as a device for coordinating the activities of the schools, the welfare, employment, transportation and housing agencies. These activities would be coordinated at the community level as well as the state and national level, for it is at the client contact point that a coordinated response to the needs of the poor is necessary. The project manager and his staff would theoretically attempt to meet as many of the needs of their poor clients as possible.

One fundamental part of the matrix approach does, of course, include industry. If an established industry has agreed to hire a given number of persons, this would be coordinated through the project manager. He would have to take care of the selection, transportation, and education or training of these persons in coordination with the industrial concern involved. He would also be prepared to look after the housing, welfare, and health care problems of the client and his family. In addition, the resources and experience of private industry might be utilized in other ways.

It is significant that in NASA the project manager is a man with a technical background--he is an engineer who can talk shop with other engineers. But the project manager tends to be a unique sort of engineer. He is usually an engineering generalist. Though his background may be in electrical engineering, he is able to understand the problems and outlooks of mechanical, aerospace, chemical and other types of engineering specialists. Thus, to make matrix management work in an attempt to deal with urban poverty, it would probably be necessary to develop the 'project manager' out of one of the professional specialties presently working on the problem. Only in such a manner can the resistance to developing an entirely new professional specialty be circumvented. While this point would require more study, poverty 'project managers' might best be developed out of professional social workers. This would require a great deal of retraining and socialization for the personnel involved, and would add to the scarcity of this type of professional. However, to some extent personnel are scarce in social work due to two factors, a tendency toward disillusionment with bureaucratic agencies, and movement into managerial positions.

The project manager in NASA does not stand alone. He is part of loose hierarchical framework that exists throughout the agency as the Apollo Program. More or less directly, the

the project manager is a part of the Apollo Program and is responsive to the schedules and other Program policy demands made upon him. A poverty 'project manager' may require such organizational or program direction and would certainly require the sort of high-level committment and support such an organization could and should generate. A 'poverty program' agency could also serve to establish some sort of coherent national policy on urban poverty, act as a clearing house for information gained from the experiences of other 'project managers' and as a guardian of the holistic ideology of the organization. Such an agency would reinforce the 'project manager's' committment to view the client as his peer, to act immediately on the client's needs, and to view the client as a whole.

The 'project manager' must have some leverage or bargaining power in the complex interrelationsnips he would have to maintain. In the NASA arrangement, the project manager can rely on the committment of the agency personnel and on his position as primary industrial contractor interface to remain in control of his project. If the project manager disagrees, the proposal does not go through, and his superiors consistently back his judgment.

How can poverty 'project managers' be assured an equivalent bargaining position? We would suggest that the 'project

manager' be made the primary contact man for the poor. The 'project manager' would be the one man to decide what needs an individual has, which are to be met first, and how each is to be met. He would then turn the individual over to the established bureaucracies for carrying out an individually tailored plan of cash grants, public housing, remedial education, employment counseling, family services, medical services, etc., and would remain in contact with the case to follow the client's progress.

Of course there would be limits to a poverty 'project manager's' authority. He could not diagnose a specific illness and prescribe the required medical treatment. But he would know what resources are available, and could refer a family to medical experts, to educational experts, and others with a recommendation as to what is needed to solve the problem presented. To make the poverty 'project manager's' recommendations effective it would probably be necessary to make the program agency a federal, or at least a federal-state organization. If federal law tied grants-in-aid or increased levels of aid to the effective implementations of the matrix-management concept, and made the 'project manager's recommendations the only service public agencies could legally provide, established professional resistance and inertia could not scuttle matrix-management before it got started.

If matrix management were in operation at the community level it would require a high level of committment to solving the problems of the urban poor. It would further require a level of bureaucratic openness and honesty which is not commonly seen. But if the NASA experience is a guide, it is clear that the coordinating activities of the project manager cause the regularly established bureaucracies to have to defend, not against their clients, but against the project managers, their unwillingness to cooperate. If this unwillingness is indefensible, positive change in the behavior of the established bureaucracy results. To be sure, establishing a matrix management procedure would result in some hostile interaction between the project manager and the spokesman of established professional bureaucracies. Matrix management, almost by definition, flushes out the problems, the gaps in services, and the unproductive bureaus. But, problems seldom solve themselves, and a procedure which forces problems into the open is probably the beginning of attempted solutions.

The project manager approach is not unlike the "metropolitan expediter" proposed by the Johnson administration, passed by Congress, but never funded. The expediter was to coordinate local bureaucracies, but only at the metropolitan level. The coordination must occur at the level of the client or we ignore the makeup of his personality. It is painfully

clear that regularly established local bureaucracies with the poor as clients are not going to disestablish. Nor are they likely to be destroyed. And, they surely are not going to self-destruct. Coordinating their activities is, therefore, the feasible alternative. Matrix-management could, if the NASA model is a fair indicator, cause established bureaucracies to concern themsleves at least as much with their clients as they do with their own survival. The project manager concept has demonstrated a capacity to bend bureaucracies, deal with industry, and get things done on tight schedules. This, in a very general way, could be a solution to the problem of bureaucratic organization and possibly, then, the beginnings of a solution to the problems of the urban poor. Nonetheless, when such a committment is made, non-bureaucratic forms of administration and management are called for or the money and effort might simply compound the problem.